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Nine Lies About School Choice: Proving the Critics Wrong

CER Report
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Introduction

When *Nine Lies* first joined the debate 13 years ago, barely any research covered school choice, despite communities in Maine and Vermont already providing it for more than one hundred years with great results. Today, however, with scholarship or voucher programs in 11 states, more than 75 privately funded programs covering 39 states, and nearly 3,400 charter schools operating in 40 states, many researchers have begun to examine the effects of choice. Now critics of school choice are not only being answered, but proven wrong. With every new program and rigorous piece of research, public support for school choice grows stronger.

While the body of supporting evidence for school choice is growing exponentially, opposition remains strong among many special-interest groups, notably their leaders who consistently block efforts to expand or establish school choice programs. What follows are the nine most prominent falsehoods – lies; a list that has changed little in more than a decade.

The original printing of *Nine Lies* was path breaking because it faced opponents' misguided arguments with sound reasoning, arming true education reformers with facts instead of myths. Since then many school-choice friendly organizations have coined their own names for the explanations but the message remains the same: School choice not only works, but has positive effects on the entire education system. This edition of *Nine Lies* is designed to serve as a "best of the best" when debunking the myths against various forms of school choice.

Lie #1 - The "Undermining-America" Argument:

Choice will destroy the American public school tradition, siphoning off needed funds and decreasing quality in public schools while leading to segregation and division.

The Reality: Numerous examples show how competition created by choice can motivate public schools to improve, and how higher funding levels without systemic reforms leave only microscopic changes, if any at all.

The critics say...

On decreased funding and public school improvement

"Vouchers are an attempt to abandon our public schools where 90 percent of our students are educated. Vouchers draw critical financial resources away from public schools, where these resources are needed to address record high enrollments, teacher shortages, maintaining and modernizing school facilities, and improving air quality."

Donna McGuire, Former President of the Connecticut PTA

The truth is...

- Spending on public education is at an all-time high. Per-student spending in the United States has doubled in constant dollars since 1971, from \$3,931 then to \$7,524 now.
- A federal judge in Kansas City, Missouri decided to test the hypothesis that unlimited funding could improve conditions in public schools. At the end of this experiment, taxpayers had nothing to show for their money; the achievement gap between Black and White students stayed the same, with Black student achievement scores showing no improvement.
- According to Harvard researcher Caroline Hoxby, isolating the effects of competition on public school achievement levels shows that public schools where choice occurs improve. Hoxby evaluated three programs: the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program and the charter school programs in Michigan and Arizona. In the 32 Milwaukee schools that faced the most competition – with two-thirds or more students eligible for vouchers – fourth-grade math achievement test scores exhibited what amounted to an annual gain of 6.3 National Percentile Rank (NPR) points over a four-year period. The 66 Milwaukee schools facing less competition (with less than two thirds of voucher eligible students) saw an annual gain of 4.8 points. In contrast, the schools facing no competition saw an annual gain of only 3.5 points.
- In Milwaukee, both per-pupil and overall funding for the public schools increased significantly under school choice. Between 1990 and 2002 – the MPS reaped this 32 percent increase in spending, enrollment grew by only 5.4 percent, and local residents saw their property tax burden decrease by over 30 percent.
- Florida's A-Plus Program, offers Opportunity Scholarships to children in schools deemed failing, two times in a four-year period. The "F" schools earned the highest achievement gains of all public schools, and those gains were 60 to 75 percent higher than "D" schools (that had the second highest achievement gains).
- The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) calls this the "Fiscal Impact of School Choice" noting that in Cleveland and Milwaukee, cities with two of the oldest choice programs, money in the public school system has increased. [Click here to read more.](#)

The critics say...

On segregation and division

"Tax-funded vouchers for private schools would increase divisions between rich and poor and among different religious, threatening the future of our democracy."

Association of Texas Professional Educators

The truth is...

In the current system of public education the quality of public schooling varies according to the quality of the neighborhood and wealth of its residents. This is far from democratic.

- The 2002 scores of urban districts on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) present the raw evidence of neglect in some of

our largest urban areas: Atlanta, Chicago, the District of Columbia, Houston, Los Angeles and New York. The city with the smallest percentage of 4th graders eligible for the free/reduced-priced school lunch program is New York with seventy percent.

- The National Urban League reports: "Research over the last decade highlights that much of the achievement gap that we have traditionally blamed on poverty and family circumstances can be attributed to systemic educational policies and practices." And according to a recent study based on data from the U.S. Department of Education, private schools are more racially integrated than neighboring public schools.
- ALEC calls this lie the "Impact of School Choice on Integration." School choice gives parents, especially low-income parents, the ability to send their students to schools outside of their immediate neighborhood. More often than not this leads to greater ethnic diversity. [Click here to read more.](#)
- Hispanic CREO also identifies the "[Racial Segregation](#)" myth.

Lie #2: The "Creaming" Argument

Choice will leave the poor behind in the worst schools.

The Reality: Public schools are not as open and accommodating – and private schools not as selective – as critics suggest.

The critics say...

"Vouchers...could siphon off your most motivated families, leaving behind the neediest kids, whose families don't have enough motivation to go after the money and spend it properly."

- Sharon Ambrose, D.C. Council Member (D-Ward 6)

The truth is...

- Public schools turn away many children with severe disabilities or behavioral programs, out-placing them to private schools at public expense. More than 4,300 private schools in the U.S. enroll students with special education needs and over 4,700 of them service students' medical health care needs. Six thousand private schools serve Title I students and over 10,000 of them serve more than 160,000 students eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch program. Far from being enclaves of privilege, private schools extend opportunity to some of America's most disadvantaged students.
- The "best" students are the most likely to remain in the school that helped them to succeed, while the students most in need of help are the ones who tend to leave. "Rather than skimming off the best students, the program seems to provide an alternative education environment for students who are not doing particularly well in the public school system," according to program evaluations in Milwaukee.
- Annual evaluations of the Milwaukee program show that it is not the "best" students who exercise choice, but rather struggling students that are most likely to switch to a different school. It was not the "A" and "B" students who opted for choice, but the "C" and "D" students. Researchers could find no strong evidence that program participants had higher levels of unmeasured characteristics, such as motivation.
- A study by the Escambia County School District in Florida found that more than two thirds of the students participating in the first year of the state's choice program scored below district and national averages on standardized tests of math and reading.

- Far from “creaming” the best students away from the public school system, Former Secretary of Education Rod Paige notes that school choice is the “new civil rights revolution” that began with Brown v. Board of Education. School choice is especially beneficial for the “vast majority of students [who are] disadvantaged or low-income.”

Lie #3 - The “Radical Schools” Scare:

Extremists such as the Ku Klux Klan, religious cults, or other radical groups will start schools.

The Reality: Existing federal and state laws prohibit all institutions from discrimination and illegal activities.

The critics say...

“Under a system of vouchers, it may be difficult to prevent schools run by extremist groups like the Nation of Islam or the Ku Klux Klan from receiving public funds to subsidize their racist and anti-Semitic agendas.”

Anti-Defamation League

The truth is...

- Parents know what is best for their children. Surveys show that the number one reason parents choose a school is academics.
- An extensive state audit of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, the nation’s oldest government funded voucher program of its kind, found that 71.1 percent of parents chose their private school because it provide higher educational standards. Other top reasons for choosing included good teachers (70.4 percent) and safe and orderly classrooms (67.8 percent).
- Over 89 percent of private schools are accredited or evaluated by external agencies such as national, regional or state private school organizations. These organizations maintain standards that have been accepted or recognized by federal, state and local education agencies.
- According to renowned economists Milton and Rose Friedman’s foundation **“school choice is supported by people from all walks of life.”**
- Excellent Education for Everyone (E3) re-states the ability of parents to choose the best school for their student in **“Myth #4.”**

Lie #4 - The “Church-State” Argument:

Allowing public funds to be used for tuition at religious schools is unconstitutional.

The Reality: The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in June 2002, that a school choice program must not have the “purpose” or “effect” of advancing or inhibiting religion. Thus, it ruled that the Cleveland, Ohio program is constitutional because public money can flow to religious schools as a result of a person’s independent choice.

The critics say...

“Private school voucher plans force Americans to pay taxes to support religious indoctrination...”

Americans United for Separation of Church and State

The truth is...

- Federal and state governments already provide billions of dollars in support to religiously affiliated organizations such as hospitals, universities, and social service providers. Government vouchers for low-income parents exist to help fund day care at private and parochial facilities. Thousands of students in higher education use federally funded Pell grants and GI Bill benefits to attend religious colleges and universities. In Florida alone, where the Opportunity Scholarships program was being fiercely litigated in courts, the Florida Department of Children and Family Services will spend millions this year for services contracted out to various faith-based organizations to support communities with social work and juvenile justice programs. And in 2002, over 30 percent of the faith based organizations in 15 states performed public community services using federal grants of \$100,000 or more, with 10 percent fulfilling contracts worth over half a million dollars.
- The next legal battleground involves these Blaine amendments and compelled support clauses that are found in 47 states. These amendments can be found in state constitutions – including Vermont's – and include language meant to stop public dollars from reaching religious institutions.
- The case of Davey v. Locke from Washington State will be addressed by the US Supreme Court on December 2, 2003. It covers a dispute in which a student was not able to use his state-granted scholarship because he wanted to use it to study theology. Until this Blaine amendment issue is resolved, states with this type of clause must be interpreted on a state-by-state basis.
- Considered an expert on the constitutionality of school choice, the Institute for Justice explains that **school choice programs that include religious schools have been declared constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court.**

Lie #5 - The "Lack of Accountability" Argument:

Private schools are largely unregulated and therefore not accountable to the public.

The Reality: Schools of choice are directly accountable to parents who can individually decide whether their school is accountable for results. Private schools must comply with existing state and federal laws regarding nondiscrimination and financial reporting. Most are accredited by recognized institutions, a third layer of accountability.

The critics say...

"Voucher programs lack accountability. Public schools are required to meet basic accountability standards, including making meetings and records such as test scores, dropout rates and other information open and available to the public. Public schools must also comply with all federal, state, and local civil rights, health and safety requirements."

Statement by several organizations, including the ACLU, Anti-Defamation League, National PTA, and NEA

The truth is...

- The "lack of accountability" argument ignores the fact that even when a public school consistently produces dismal results, it continues to be propped up by enrollment and continues to receive taxpayer funding.
- Countless examples exist showing high levels of public school spending corresponding with low or declining levels of student achievement. Student achievement is stagnant across several states according to the 2003

National Assessment of Educational Progress. Limiting the use of public funds to public schools is no guarantee of accountability. Regulation does not equal accountability.

- Private schools, like any other business must adhere to laws pertaining to tax reporting, accounting, truth in advertising, employment, zoning, etc.
- A state audit of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program found that most private schools participating used some form of standardized testing or are independently accredited. The audit found that 76 of the 86 schools participating at the time enrolled 93 percent of the students in the choice program and either administered a standardized test and/or earned accreditation from an independent accrediting authority.

Lie #6 - The "Big Brother" Argument:

Accepting public funds would make private schools vulnerable to intrusive government regulation.

The Reality: This is a legitimate concern often raised by free-market advocates and private schools (opponents raise it too, though not necessarily with the same sincerity). Fears about excessive regulation, however, may be allayed by well-designed choice programs that protect private schools from intrusive regulations and by a thoughtful review of the facts.

The critics say...

"Private school vouchers would make parochial schools less parochial and private schools less private, subjecting them to public supervision and compromising their independence."

Richard Riley, Former U.S. Secretary of Education

The truth is...

- The most compelling evidence comes from the Milwaukee experience. The longest running school choice program of its kind, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program has not led to excessive or intrusive regulations on private schools. In fact, with every passing year, more private schools have opted to participate in the program (from seven to 102 as of January 2003) — proof that the private schools like what they see. New private schools have been founded directly in response to the demand generated by choice. For the five-year period from the 1995-1996 to the 1999-2000 school years, the county including Cleveland saw a 13 percent growth in its number of private schools compared to a 9 percent decline statewide, and Milwaukee's county grew by 4 percent compared to 3 percent growth statewide.
- However, even the most stalwart defenders of free markets must concede that the libertarian utopia of private schooling simply doesn't exist. Private schools are already subject to basic regulations concerning health and safety, nondiscrimination, etc. In some states, regulations also pertain to curriculum content, length of the school year, and teacher qualifications. If anything, school choice would bolster the number and strength of private schools making them more effective in resisting excessive regulation.
- Well-crafted school choice laws are the way to ward off excessive entanglement. The last thing true education reformers want to see is another, parallel public school system. Giving parents meaningful choices demands a school choice package that is free from over-regulation. [See what the Friedman Foundation has to say about the matter \(see page 44\).](#)

Lie #7 - The "Choice is Expensive" Argument:

Vouchers don't cover the cost of private schools. Poor families will be left behind.

The Reality: The issue is not whether or not Private schools cost more, but whether voucher amounts are on par with what is spent on public schools. Of the three programs enacted in the 90s, all spent half or less than the per pupil cost.

The critics say...

"A voucher rarely covers the cost of tuition. The losers will be the minorities and the low-income students."

Representative Robert Scott, D-Virginia

The truth is...

There are plenty of low-income families who are finding affordable private schools with the help of scholarships:

- In Washington, D.C., all private schools that enroll scholarship students cover any remaining tuition costs so that the maximum number of students may attend. The prestigious Sidwell Friends, the school of choice for many members of Congress, covered expenses of nearly \$15,000 per student so that scholarship families were still able to attend cost-free.
- In 1999, roughly 74,000 low-income children used vouchers (from 3 publicly funded programs and 79 privately funded programs) to attend private schools. In 2002, roughly 37,000 students participated in the publicly funded private school voucher programs currently running in five states. These students are in addition to the 60,000 children currently using vouchers from over 100 privately funded programs to attend private schools.
- Most private schools are affordable, though a few do charge high tuition. As the U.S. Department of Education reported in June 2003, 29 percent of all private schools charge tuitions less than \$2,500 and 76 percent of them cost less than \$5,000. The average private school tuition is \$4,689, while the average public school expenditure per pupil was \$7,392, more than 50 percent higher than average private school tuition costs.
- Researcher Dan Lips used the city of Baltimore as an example of how to **disprove the "School Choice is Expensive" myth**. If the city implemented a scholarship plan millions of dollars would be saved immediately.

Lie #8 - The "Choice Is Limited" Argument:

There are neither enough tuition scholarships nor enough seats in private schools for more students.

The Reality: The supply of private schools is elastic and responds to demand.

The critics say...

"In Chicago, for example, there're 500,000 students in the school system. Suppose 10 percent got vouchers. That would be 50,000... and there's no place for them to go. But even if there were what about the 450,000 who are left behind? . . . It seems to me that vouchers become a cop-out for a few at the expense of the masses."

Jesse Jackson, President Rainbow/Push Coalition

The truth is...

The supply of private schools is not fixed. As demand for private schools increases, so too will their supply.

- We need only look to the experience of charter schools to see the large number of schools that have been created in response to demand for more and better choices in schooling. As of May 2005, almost nearly 3,400 charter schools were open in the U.S., all of which have been started in just the past 13 years. Of that number, about 94 percent are "start-ups"—entirely new schools with added capacity.
- School choice turns the static education monopoly into a marketplace that is responsive to consumer demand.
- Patrick Byrne, the Chairman and President of Overstock.com, a long-time supporter of opening the public education system to market forces, discussed the **myth that the school choice movement won't be able to have a significant impact on reforming the entire public education system.**

Private schools don't have a lot of empty seats because they have to be efficient; they maintain enough seats for the number of students they believe will enroll. With 89 percent of all students now enrolled in public schools, it would be ridiculous for private schools to run classrooms with nine empty desks for every one occupied desk. No school could afford to operate that way.

Lie #9 - The "Failed Experiment" Argument:

There is no evidence that school choice works.

The Reality: School choice gives more students access to private schools, charter schools and access to a better education. Numerous studies confirm that students enrolled in private schools, either through choice programs or independently do better academically compared to their peers in the public schools.

The critics say...

"[The proponents'] most misleading claim is that vouchers will benefit inner-city schools. There's no evidence that vouchers make any academic difference, and plenty of evidence that at-risk kids have better programs that could be funded right in their own public schools."

Barry W. Lynn, Executive Director,
Americans United for Separation of Church and State

The truth is...

- A study conducted by researchers from the University of Wisconsin, Georgetown, and Harvard found that Black students participating in privately funded voucher programs in Dayton, Ohio, New York City, and Washington, DC performed significantly better on tests after two years in private school than did the students who remained in public school. In addition, the participating students narrowed the gap between their scores and those of white students by one-third.
- New York City students outscored their peers on the combined reading and math sections of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills by 6.1, 4.2, and 8.4 National Percentile Rank (NPR) points at the end of their first, second and third years, respectively.
- Children from low-income families who participated in the privately funded

Children's Scholarship Fund in Charlotte, NC improved their performance on standardized math tests significantly. The children in the private schools were almost three times more likely to want to go to school and feel safe in school than their public school peers.

- After a decade in operation, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program showed that low-income students in the program made significant gains in math and reading after three years.
- Research studies consistently find that private schools, even after adjusting for the socio-economic backgrounds of their students, do a better job overall of educating students than the public schools.
- CER answered the question "Do School Choice Programs Work?", in a series of [Frequently Asked Questions about school choice](#). The short answer is that in cities and states across the country new information emerges almost daily confirming the positive impact all the forms of school choice are having on education in the United States.

Conclusion

School choice has united a majority of Americans with leaders across the political and racial spectrums: Democrat Senator Dianne Feinstein of California says,

"I have never before supported a voucher program. For over 30 years, I have advocated strongly for our public schools, because I believe that they are the cornerstones of our educational system. In my view, we must continue to do everything we can to strengthen and improve our nation's public schools . . . based on the substantial amount of money pumped into the schools and the resultant test scores, I do not believe that money alone is going to solve the problem . . . ultimately this issue is not about ideology or political correctness. It is about providing a new opportunity for good education, which is the key to success."

Link here for [Bibliography, references and more on the arguments](#).

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The Center for Education Reform (CER) creates opportunities for and challenges obstacles to better education for America's communities. Founded in 1993, CER combines education policy with grassroots advocacy to foster positive and bold education reforms. For more information, contact CER at (202) 822-9000 or [send us email](#).



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